

# Angels in Early Christian Narratives on the Resurrection of Jesus Canonical and Apocryphal Texts

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The empty tomb stories in early Christian Gospels try to express in narrative what texts like 1Cor 15:3-5 say in the form of the creed: *The crucified Jesus of Nazareth has been risen from the dead*. The subject is an event which indeed had an unprecedented historical effect, though its incomprehensible origin remains in the free act of God. If the resurrection of Jesus points to God's intervention in this world, then this will open various possibilities to have angels play an important role as agents within these stories or as commenting on this event. In this contribution I would like to describe how the various resurrection accounts portray and develop angel-(like) figures and their functions in these contexts. I shall start with the probably most ancient „empty tomb story“, the original ending of the Gospel of Mark (Mark 16:1-8). Both other Synoptics, Matthew and Luke, offer clearly more elaborated Easter accounts, which are at least partly based on Mark; moreover, Luke–Acts presents two short narratives on Jesus' Ascension. How do the roles of angels develop in these narratives in comparison to the Gospel of Mark and what are the backgrounds of these developments? But the evolution does not stop with the Synoptics: Not only the Gospel of John probably presupposes the Synoptics (at least Mark and Luke), but extra-canonical texts are interesting in this respect, too: While the secondary ending of Mark (Mark 16:9-20; probably 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) is not important with regard to our topic, we do see interesting developments in apocryphal texts of that time, e.g. in the *Gospel of Peter*.

## 1. Mark 16:1-8

The difficulties regarding the ending of the Gospel of Mark have been well known for a long time. Is it possible that a literary work does end with the word *ῥῆς*? Is it imaginable (and probable) that at its ending a Gospel recounts the fear of women, who do not dare to report their

experience?<sup>1</sup> How people took offence at on this ending since earliest times is shown by the various continuations which were appended later. But even the preceding scene (Mark 16:1-8) has its difficulty: What part do the women mentioned here play? Without expressing it explicitly, from the very beginning the text does imply that their behaviour is foolish: After Jesus' announcements of his passion and resurrection (8:31-33; 9:31 and 10:32-34), after the confession of the centurion, who acknowledges under the cross that the „suffering righteous one“ (Ps 22; 69), „the suffering servant“ (Isa 42) Jesus of Nazareth is „the Son of God“, there is, at least according to Mark, no need to buy odoriferous oil and embalm the corpse of Jesus (with the intention to preserve it) (Mark 16:2).<sup>2</sup> Anyone acting like this could, according to Mark, possibly have understood the true significance of Jesus' death.<sup>3</sup> But even the consecutive action does not seem to be calculated properly: Only on their way to the tomb the women realise that it is closed by a large stone (Mark 16:3). To the women's surprise, however, they find the stone already rolled away when they arrive at the tomb.

The description of the scene taking place in the tomb is remarkable: Why does the text not write of an „angel“ whom the women encounter, but of a νεανίσκος, a „young man,“ who is seated on the right, instead? A look at ancient parallels, where angels are described as youths shows the extraordinariness of the Markan account:<sup>4</sup>

1. According to the fifth chapter of the book of Tobit G<sup>II</sup>, Tobit addresses the angel Rafael three times as νεανίσκος (Tob 5:5,7,10 G<sup>II</sup>; see also; Old Latin: *iuvenis*). On the one hand this, of course, expresses the fact that Rafael actually appears to him as a young man. But moreover a second aspect can be observed, which the text (G<sup>II</sup> as well as Old Latin) emphasizes at the end of 5:4: Tobit addresses Rafael as a „young man“ because *he* – contrary to the reader – is ignorant of the fact that he speaks to an angel.

2. A passage in Flavius Josephus' *Antiquitates* (AJ 5,8,2 § 277) is frequently mentioned as a parallel, too: Within the framework of Josephus' description of the Simson-cycle the announcement of Simson's birth, made by an angel, is told:<sup>5</sup> *When the woman was all alone in*

1 On these problems see also, e.g., Giesen, *Auferstandene*.

2 On the anointment as „analogielosem Vorgang“ see Pesch, *Markusevangelium* 529-530. Lührmann, *Markusevangelium* 269, speaks of a twofold anachronism: Jesus is already embalmed according to Mark 14:3-9 and after 15:42-47 also buried.

3 See also Schenke, *Markusevangelium* 351, who, however, points to the women's love as their motive of conduct.

4 The parallels are used, most of the time without any substantial comparisons, to show that Mark supposedly reflects similar ancient-Jewish customs.

5 Translation according to H. Clementz.

the house, an angel of God (ἄγγελος) appeared unto her in the shape of a slender and beautiful youth (νεανίας) .... The difference to Mark's description is obvious; Josephus first lets it be known that an angel appears to Simson's mother – and only hereafter describes his appearance. In Mark, however, the word „angel“ does not occur in this context.

3. The third chapter of 2Maccabees tells about an attempt made by Heliodoros, King Seleucus' chancellor, to confiscate the Temple's treasury. When Heliodoros and his guards walk into the treasury chamber, however, they become witness to a tremendous epiphany (2Macc 3:24): Not only does a horse with a „gruesome rider“ with golden weapons and in golden armor appear which is charging furiously at Heliodoros and kicking at him with its hoofs, there are also two νεανίαι „filled with enormous power, in radiant beauty and majestically clothed“ mentioned, who incessantly whip Heliodoros severely, until he falls to the ground (2Macc 3:26-27). While Heliodoros lies there to die, the high priest Onias begs to save his life, whereupon both young men appear to Heliodoros once again<sup>6</sup> and reveal to him why his life is being spared (2Macc 3:33-34). In contrast to the first two examples, 2Maccabees does not explicitly call these young men „angels“, but yet clarifies much more distinctly than Mark does that they must be angels. They are accompanying the „great Epiphany“, that is staged by God who is described as „Lord of the Spirits“(2Macc 3:24) here.

4. In this light also some passages from the visions of the *Shepherd of Hermas* are possibly of interest.<sup>7</sup> I choose just two significant examples.

Vision II 4 tells of a dream of Hermas: *While I slept however, brothers, I received a revelation from a beautiful young man* (ὑπὸ νεανίσκου εὐειδестаύτου), who spoke to me: „Who do you think is the old woman from whom you received the letter?“. No angel is explicitly mentioned here. But because the passage tells of a revelation, (at least) the reader understands that the young man mentioned must in fact be an angel. But maybe the text consciously speaks of a νεανίσκος (and not an „angel“) here. This seems probable when taking a look at Vision III: Here, next to the „old woman“, whom Hermas takes for the Sibyl at first but who is revealed in Vision II 4 as being the „church“, six young men turn up, who build a magnificent tower on the old woman's command. Then Hermas asks what this tower stands for. Again, he is told that it is the „church“. However, the following is of interest: Even though the context – because all this is a vision! – makes clear that we are confronted with heavenly creatures, Hermas wants to know who the six youths are who

6 2Macc 3:33 explicitly refers to 3:26 – the same young men are concerned here!

7 Text according to: Lindemann / Paulsen, Väter.

have built the tower (III 4). Only then is explained: „*Those are the holy Angels of God, the first created; To them the Lord has given his whole creation...*“ (III 4).

This means, however, that the scene in the Gospel of Mark has an exceptional position within early Jewish and Christian literature: Mark never explicitly states that the νεανίσκος must be an angel. The reader can only deduce it from his description (and maybe from his message): He is clothed with a white garment (on white clothing of angels see also 1En 71:1; TLevi 8:2; TJob 3:1; 4:1; 5:2; 2Macc 11:8 and others). White clothing was mentioned in Mark for the last time in 9:3 at Jesus' transfiguration, where it was made clear that the Transfigured One emits a glimpse of God's glory formerly concealed within himself. The motif of the „frightening“ women (16:5) as well as the opening words of the angel's annunciation „Do not be alarmed!“ (both times the verb ἐκθαμβέομαι is used) also indicate that this event must be an epiphany, or more precisely an angelophany. The contents of the angel's speech is plain, but Christologically speaking highly important. Mark 16:6 does not speak about Jesus as the Christ or the Son of God, but rather as Jesus of Nazareth (see also Mark 1:9; 10:47; 14:68) to whom the words „the crucified one“ are attributed.<sup>8</sup> This *human being* Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified, is now said to have been risen. Through the use of the passive ἡγέρθη the acting of God with regard to the deceased Jesus is emphasized. This risen Jesus, however, is no longer in this place, but goes forth to Galilee, the region where the Jesus story had started according to the Gospel of Mark. There he will appear to women and disciples. Do the closing words „just as he told you“ imply a hidden critique? In fact, women and disciples should have known from Jesus' words what would happen. However, even in spite of the epiphany they still do not understand. This might be the key to the question why the text uses νεανίσκος instead of ἄγγελος to refer to the angel. With regard to this question, I suspect that the text has a double meaning: The women only „see“ a young man, but do not understand that they are encountered by an angel, who brings a heavenly message to them. Because of this they react in a completely wrong way and do not tell anyone anything about their experience. The reader, however, understands that a revelation account is being told. So the angel's words are addressed to him. The fact that these women fail to react to this revelation appropriately urges the reader to complete the Gospel's open end with his own act of proclamation.

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8 Gnllka, *Evangelium* 342, is right when he writes that Jesus here is „gänzlich im Hinblick auf sein irdisches Schicksal beschrieben.“

A completely different explanation as to why the text speaks of a νεανίσκος and not of an ἄγγελος, has been given by M. Meyer, who connects the canonical text of Mark's Gospel to fragments of the so-called „secret Gospel of Mark“.<sup>9</sup> According to Meyer in the „secret Gospel of Mark“ a sub-plot can be detected which is not to be found in the canonical text. In this sub-plot a νεανίσκος plays a role which can be compared with the role of „beloved disciple“ in the gospel of John.<sup>10</sup> The line of action reconstructed by Meyer begins in Mark 10:17-22, the account about the rich man, who asks Jesus what he needs to do in order to inherit eternal life. Meyer suggests that this young man is the same whose resuscitation is mentioned in fragment 1 of the „secret Gospel of Mark“ (to be placed between Mark 10:34 and 35).<sup>11</sup> According to Meyer the rich man's repudiation of Jesus narrated in Mark 10:22 has driven him to his death; then his resuscitation by Jesus is narrated, which leads him to respond to Jesus' love (Mark 10:21) with love. Now the young man is initiated by Jesus into the secret of the Kingdom of God. Moreover, the description of his clothing with the words περιβεβλημένος σινδόνα ἐπὶ γυμνοῦ (secret Mark frg. 1) corresponds to Mark 14:51 where the young man appears again. Meyer finds a further indication of the young man in the second fragment of „the secret Gospel of Mark“, which must be inserted in Mk 10:46. The text then would turn out to be as follows: „And he comes to Jericho. The sister of the youth whom Jesus loved was there, along with his mother and Salome, but Jesus did not receive them (fem.). And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a large crowd Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the side of the road.“<sup>12</sup> Finally, according to Meyer, the mysterious passage in Mark 14:51-52 tells that the beloved young man flees

9 Cf. Meyer, *Secret Gospel*. – The very obscure circumstances under which the „secret Gospel of Mark“ was discovered need not be repeated here. The voices of those who are convinced that this text is a forgery have not become any more silent in the past years than those who actually want to see traces of an antique apocryphon in the alleged Letter of Clemens of Alexandria, discovered by M. Smith. I myself am very sceptical with regard to this text and have argued my point in my contribution Nicklas, *Traditions about Jesus in Apocryphal Gospels*. – For a text of „secret Mark“ cf. M. Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, and Lührmann, *Fragmente* 182-185.

10 Further on this also Meyer, *Secret Mark*. – For a critical review of Meyer's arguments see also Evans, *Mark* 8-16, 427-428.

11 This connection, however, can only be established through an artifice: Meyer, *Secret Gospel* 122-123, has to insert the νεανίσκος of the Matthean parallel (Matt 19:20-21) into Mark's text. According to him Matthew has preserved the original wording of the pericope here. Furthermore, he has to decide for the weakly attested reading πλούσιος in Mark 10:17 (see also Luke 18:18,23). Moreover, the words of the rich man ἐκ νεότητός μου, which could implicate that he is *no longer* young, are used to show that he is still young.

12 Meyer, *Secret Gospel* 125.

at Jesus' arrest, just like the other disciples had done, and thereby even left behind his garments, which represented the clothing of those who prepared for baptism. The νεανίσκος in the tomb (Mark 16:5-7) is then not to be interpreted as an angel, but rather as the beloved youth, whose story began in Mark 10:17-22.<sup>13</sup> Again he wears the ritual garment, which, however, is now white like after baptism, which reminds us of the justified ones of the Apocalypse (Rev 7:9); „These white robes reserved for glorified Christians recall the garb of initiates into some of the mystery religions of antiquity: in the mysteries of Isis, those of the Orphics, the Andanian mysteries, and the like, the faithful werde commonly dressed in white linen.“<sup>14</sup> While the women flee and do not disperse the youth's message, he stands for the future of the belief in the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth. As fascinating as Meyer's interpretation might seem to be at first glance, as severe are its problems (apart from the question whether the „secret Gospel of Mark“ rightly may be counted as an ancient text instead of a forgery manufactured much later). This is already visible in the issue whether fragment 1 of „secret Mark“ really can be connected to Mark 10:17-22 (see fn. 11, above). But Meyer also does not explain why Mark 16:1-8 shows all the elements of epiphany mentioned above and where the young man found his insight after his flight according to Mark 14:51-52. Furthermore, it remains unclear why Mark 16:5 presents the young man without (definite) article. Ought the text not imply that the women saw τὸν νεανίσκον, when it would concern the already known figure from 10:17-22 and 14:51-52?

## 2. Matt 28:1-8

Matthew's empty tomb story differs from Mark's account in numerous ways.<sup>15</sup> Here women – in this case Mary Magdalene and „the other“ Mary – also go on their way to the tomb. But Matthew does not seem to be interested in a negative evaluation of both women. He focuses mainly on the eschatological significance of what happened at Jesus' resurrection. Because of this, gaps are filled and questions answered where the Markan text leaves things open. Surely even Matthew does not describe the actual event of Jesus' resurrection. However, the angel

13 See Meyer, *Secret Gospel* 128-130.

14 Meyer, *Secret Gospel* 129. On the supposed connections between early Christianity and ancient Mystery cults, which can be derived therefrom, see also Meyer, *Youths*.

15 More elaborately on the relations of both versions compare Luz, *Evangelium* 26-28, 397-400.

not only reveals the significance of the events to the women, he also embodies God's interaction with the world. This is already expressed through the motif of „the great earthquake“ (see also Zech 14:4-5; on earthquakes as an eschatological sign see also Mark 13:8; Matt 24:7; Luke 21:11; Rev 6:12; 8:5; 11:13,19; 16:18; at the death of Jesus Matt 27:54; as a sign of God's wrath Ez 38:19).<sup>16</sup> But maybe the earthquake points even more specifically towards resurrection. In fact, at least according to the LXX version, the vision on the resurrection of the dead bones of Israel told in Ez 37:1-14 is also introduced by an earthquake (Ez 37:7 LXX). But most of all Matt 28 shows a correlation to Matt 27:51-52, where the trembling of the earth at Jesus' death is connected to the opening of the graves and resuscitation of many saints.

With regard to our topic it is interesting that Matt does not simply speak of an angel but rather of an „angel of the Lord“<sup>17</sup>, who already played a part on three different, rather decisive occasions in the Gospel. The angel of the Lord, who according to Matt 1:20; 2:13 and 19 appeared repeatedly to Joseph in a dream, namely to convince him to recognize Jesus as his son, to save him from Herodes' wrath and to return from Egypt to Israel, now descends from heaven, rolls away the stone from the tomb and sits down. Can we appreciate this as a sign of triumph over death?<sup>18</sup>

This angel is also described more thoroughly than the „youth“ in the Gospel according to Mark:

Mark 16:5	... νεανίσκον καθήμενον ἐν τοῖς δεξιotoῖς περιβεβλημένον στολήν λευκήν
Matt 28:3	ἦν δὲ ἡ εἰδὲα αὐτοῦ ὡς ἀστραπή καὶ τὸ ἔνδυμα αὐτοῦ λευκὸν ὡς χιῶν.

The words „like a flash of lightning“ find their most significant parallel in the portrayal of an angel in Dan 10:6 LXX; καὶ τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ ὡσεὶ ὄρασις ἀστραπῆς. An interesting parallel to the description of the garments as „white like snow“ we find in 1Enoch, where in chapter 14

16 Gnllka, *Matthäusevangelium* 493, speaks of a „theophanic element“, Wiefel, *Evangelium* 489, about a „theophanic-cosmic signal“. – Nevertheless I regard it improbable that the (image of an) earthquake is used here as a topos to represent a miracle of deliverance, as Sand, *Evangelium* 581, argues. Frankemölle, *Matthäuskommentar* 519, is correct when he argues that the text explicitly notes this (γάρ!) and paints the angel's descent as cause of the earthquake.

17 Davies / Allison, *Gospel* 665 n. 20, however, emphasize that the usage of the term „angel of the Lord“ does not imply that the text speaks her about „God in visible form“.

18 Cf., e.g., Fiedler, *Matthäusevangelium* 424. – Sand, *Evangelium* 581, calls this „höherliche[s] Verhalten“.

God's throne is depicted:<sup>19</sup> "And from beneath the throne were issuing streams of flaming fire. It was difficult to look at it. And the Great Glory was sitting upon it – as for his gown, which was shining more brightly than the sun, it was whiter than any snow" (14:19-20).<sup>20</sup> The fact that his garment „is as white as snow“ thus shows that the angel directly comes from the spheres of the glory of the Lord. And again one may find connections to other passages in the Gospel of Matthew: The comparison with a „flash of lightning“ is also used in Mt 24:27 to describe the eschatological coming of the Son of Man.

According to Matthew the angel opens the tomb and makes, through his appearance, the guards tremble and fall down to the ground like dead men. Then he reveals the message of Jesus' resurrection to the women, who here become, quite differently from the Gospel of Mark, messengers of faith (Matt 28:8).<sup>21</sup> But although he is attributed as angel of *the Lord*, it is not said, that he himself causes Jesus' resurrection<sup>22</sup> – the text avoids describing what happens in the tomb itself. Nevertheless he is described in more active terms than the „young man“ in the Gospel of Mark. His task, however, is not to bring Jesus back to life again, he mainly focusses (1) on taking away all obstacles – the enemies<sup>23</sup> as well as the big stone – which might hinder the resurrection and (2) revealing it to the women. But the fact that this is done by an angel, whose attributes describe him as originating from God's glory and who is even assigned as „Angel of the Lord“, also shows how early Christianity emphasizes that the creed in Jesus' resurrection cannot be attributed to one's own inspiration, but must be understood in the sense of a revelation initiated by God. Furthermore, the circumstances surrounding this revelation indicate that this resurrection is acted out by God and must be understood in light of its eschatological significance.

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19 Further parallels: Ps 51:9; Isa 1:18; Lam 4:7; Dan 7:9; JosAs 16:8,18.

20 Translation: Isaac, Enoch 21. – The background is Ez 1:26-28. Further on this passage, compare Nickelsburg, Enoch 264.

21 However, they do not contain a „missionary assignment“ in the strict sense of the word, as Luz, Evangelium 26-28, 405, emphasizes. But compare Matt 28:19-20!

22 Luz, Evangelium 26-28, 402, rightly states: „Wie und wann Jesus das Grab verlassen hat, erfahren wir nicht.“

23 The fact that the guards are now seemingly dead, is of course consciously formulated as contrast to Jesus' resurrection, as for example Sand, Evangelium 581, states.



### 3. Luke 24:1-11 and Acts 1:9-11

The empty tomb story in the Gospel of Luke is clearly closer connected to the Markan narrative than the episode of Matthew's Gospel.<sup>24</sup> Concerning our question it is interesting that Luke – like Matthew – does not speak of a νεανίσκος sitting in the grave, but of „two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning“ (καὶ ἰδοὺ ἄνδρες δύο ἐπέστησαν αὐταῖς ἐν ἐσθῇτι ἁστραπτούσῃ), who approach the women. Once again the description of the clothes makes one aware that the text is concerned with superterrestrial beings here; again it does not speak about „angels“.<sup>25</sup>

Something similar can be found in the account of Jesus' ascent according to Acts (Acts 1:9-11). While the parallel narration in Luke 24:50-52 tells that the disciples prostrate before Jesus, who is taken up into heaven, and then return to Jerusalem with great joy, Acts 1:10 once again introduces two men in white clothes who explain to the disciples who are completely concentrating on the sky,<sup>26</sup> that Jesus will return the same way he was taken up. Both *pairs* – both the „men“ in the grave as well as those at Jesus' Ascension – are usually considered to be explanatory angels, *angeli interpretes*, who want to correct the behaviour of the addressed persons particularly in Acts 1:10-11.<sup>27</sup> But is this really the case? In their commentary on the Bezan text of Acts J. Rius-Camps and J. Read-Heimerdinger have proposed a highly interesting different interpretation of the scene which not only explains why Luke speaks of „men“ instead of „angels“, but also clarifies why the text speaks of *two* men (and not just one like Mark and Matthew).<sup>28</sup>

Rius-Camps and Read-Heimerdinger point to the connection of the passage to the transfiguration-scene. In all three passages two „other-worldly“ figures appear and in all three cases they are also introduced in the same manner.

24 It is not possible to discuss the question to which extent Luke is critically concerned with the idea that the risen Jesus is an angel-like being. For more information see: Fletcher-Louis, Luke-Acts 63-70.

25 This has been seen regularly: Cf., e.g., Fitzmyer, Gospel 1544.

26 The text uses the verb ἀτενίζω (instead of βλέπω), through which a strenuous, concentrated gaze is being expressed.

27 See, e.g., Fitzmyer, Acts 210, relating to Acts 1:10. Regarding the correction of behaviour see also Pesch, Apostelgeschichte 1, 73. – Ernst, Evangelium 652, speaks about a „leisen Vorwurf an die Frauen.“

28 Rius-Camps / Read-Heimerdinger, Message 89-90. What both authors state with regard to the Bezan text, can as well be used on the Alexandrian text, because there are no important differences between both texts with respect to our question.

Luke 9:30	καὶ ἰδοὺ ἄνδρες δύο συνελάλουν αὐτῷ,
Luke 24:4	... καὶ ἰδοὺ ἄνδρες δύο ἐπέστησαν ...
Acts 1:10	καὶ ἰδοὺ ἄνδρες δύο ...

From the parallel introductions Rius-Camps and Read-Heimerdinger conclude that the text speaks about the same characters here, but only Luke 9:30 tells who is concerned: οἵτινες ἦσαν Μωϋσῆς καὶ Ἠλίας.

Moses and Elijah thus appear in different important passages of the Luke-Acts as representatives of the Tora to confirm that Jesus' interpretation of his Messianism corresponds to God's Plan as indicated by the scriptures: „Thus, the repeated predictions of Jesus concerning his passion, death and resurrection, just as his insistence on explaining the Scriptures once he had come back to life, are validated by the very characters who personify the divine word.”<sup>29</sup>

This surprising interpretation is worth to be considered more in detail; (1) It is difficult to answer the question how weighty the argument is that the „heavenly“ figures are introduced in all three cases in the same way while hardly any importance must be given to the fact that all three are also clothed in „characteristic garments of those who already belong to the divine sphere“<sup>30</sup>. Of course, not only Moses and Elijah, but also angels belong to this sphere – and in this light one might consider that on all three occasions the descriptions of the heavenly figures differ at least in details:

Luke 9:31	οἱ ὀφθέντες ἐν δόξῃ
Luke 24:4	ἐν ἑσθῇτι ἀστραπούσῃ
Acts 1:10	ἐν ἑσθήρεσι λευκαῖς

But nevertheless this does not answer the question if the common declaration of „two men“ may only be ascribed to coincidence (or possibly to Lukan style of writing). Luke speaks of angels on numerous other occasions, but there he names them as such (see Luke 1:11; 1:26-38; 2:9-15; 8:26 etc). So Luke 24:4 and Acts 1:10 are clearly differing from other angelophanies in the Gospel of Luke, though connected to Luke 9:30-31 by the common introduction.

(2) However, the question has to be asked why Luke does not identify both figures in the grave more clearly as he did with Moses and Elijah at Jesus' Ascension. Only in a very scrutinous reading of the text the words καὶ ἰδοὺ ἄνδρες δύο point the reader to a possible connection between the figures occurring time and again. In this regard the difference at least between the scenes of transfiguration and ascension (according to Acts 1:9-11) is striking. According to Lk 9:33 at least Peter

29 Rius-Camps / Read-Heimerdinger, Message 90.

30 Rius-Camps / Read-Heimerdinger, Message 90.

immediately recognizes the heavenly figures as Moses and Elijah, while in Acts 1,10 both remain not only unnamed by the narrator, but (obviously) also unknown to the disciples.

(3) Perhaps the main argument against Rius-Camps / Read-Heimerdinger is that Luke 24:23 (even in the Bezan text) describes the women's experience at the grave as an ὁπτασία ἀγγέλων, a fact both authors do not mention. But even this is no compulsory reason to dismiss the Moses-Elijah-thesis, because it is not the narrator of Luke's Gospel who speaks in 24:23, but the two disciples walking to Emmaus, who evidently have not (yet) understood the significance of the events.

The arguments mentioned above thus cannot refute Rius-Camps and Read-Heimerdinger's thesis, but in my opinion they at least make it quite improbable.

Whichever way one might decide: The function of both heavenly creatures in Jesus's grave and at his ascension is to criticise the behaviour of the addressed persons and to interpret what has happened.

Contrary to the parallel accounts of Mark and Matthew the heavenly creatures' assignment is restricted to that: Neither Luke 24:5b-7 nor Acts 1:11 give an explicit assignment to the persons addressed.

#### 4. The Gospel of John

In the Easter accounts of the Gospel of John angels only have a very marginal role to play. Here it is Mary Magdalene alone, who first comes to the grave and recognizes that the stone has been taken away (John 20:1). She, however, does not receive a revelation, but she is the one who informs Peter and the Beloved Disciple, who both hurry to the grave. Although the Beloved Disciple reaches the grave earlier than Peter he does not enter it. But while Peter just enters the grave and *sees* the vernicle and stripes of linen lying there,<sup>31</sup> the other disciple enters, *sees and believes* (John 20:8). The beloved disciple thus does not need an angel to interpret the visible signs of Jesus' resurrection – he obtains faith on his own. In this light also the following scene concerning Mary Magdalene (John 20:11ff.) must surely be interpreted: She also has only seen the empty grave, but not made a confession of faith. However, when she bents over to look into the tomb (20:11), she also sees something: Contrary to Peter and the Beloved disciple she „sees“ two angels in white; one is sitting in the place where Jesus' head has been laid and the other where his feet have been placed. Contrary to both Mark and

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31 Very probably the text resembles the Lazarus-story (John 11) here.

Luke John unambiguously speaks of angels here. This is why the description may be quite concise. The most significant difference to the Synoptic accounts, however, consists in the fact that these angels do not give any interpretation of the events, but only address Mary with the question: „Woman why are you weeping?“.

While the beloved disciple became a believer after seeing just the linen cloth and vernicle, Mary reacts with almost the same words as in 20:2 when she just found the empty tomb:

20:2	ἦραν τὸν κύριον ἐκ τοῦ μνημείου καὶ οὐκ οἶδामεν ποῦ ἔθηκαν αὐτόν.
20:13	ἦραν τὸν κύριόν μου, καὶ οὐκ οἶδα ποῦ ἔθηκαν αὐτόν

Through this the angels' task is actually accomplished. Mary turns round and sees Jesus, but does not recognize him immediately. Only when he calls her name, is she able to overcome her ignorance, and recognize him as her „master“ (20:16). Now she can proclaim that she has seen the Lord (20:18a). How can this different role of the angels in John's Gospel be explained? The answer is rather obvious: according to the Gospel of John only Jesus, the Christ and Son of God (John 20:30-31), the Incarnate Word of God (1:1.14) is the distinguished Revealer.<sup>32</sup> Meeting him makes it possible to obtain faith. Seeing him means seeing the Glory of God. Already in the scene of Lazarus' resurrection Jesus reveals to Martha that he is „the resurrection and the life“ (John 11:25). So it would be inconsistent if something as significant as the resurrection of Jesus would have to be interpreted by angels and not by Jesus, the Revealer himself.

If one wants to understand the Gospel of John as actually playing with its Synoptic pre-texts (most probably Mark and Luke), then the story may surely be seen as a sly dig at the idea that „angels“ (like in Mark and Luke) may have any significance for the revelation of Jesus (or its interpretation). The tradition about angels at the tomb is by no means given up, but the angels here only have the function to show Mary's perseverance in misinterpreting the given situation – a misinterpretation which can only be overcome by the Revealer himself.

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32 How far John sees Jesus as God's Revealer can also be seen in 1:51, one of the few other passages in John's Gospel where angels „occur“: here Jesus prophesies to the disciples that they will see heaven open and God's angel descending and ascending on the Son of Man. The allusion to Gen 28:12, the scene on Jacob and the ladder to heaven, is clear. The scene is interpreted in different ways: I find the most probable interpretation the one that sees the Son of Man – like the ladder – to be a bridge between heaven and earth. Through him revelation is possible, which is made clear by the image of the angel's decension and ascension. Further (also on the history of research) see Nicklas, Ablösung 190-197.

## 5. The Gospel of Peter – Mark 16:4 k (Bobbiensis) – *Ascension of Isaiah* 3:17-18

While the Gospel according to John assigns only a marginal role to the angels at the tomb, the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* not only further develops several aspects of the Synoptical texts, but shows even a new dimension, which is not found in the canonical Gospels.<sup>33</sup>

5.1. Like Matthew the *Gospel of Peter* tells of the guarding of Jesus' tomb (V.29-49), which is accomplished not only by a centurion named Petronius and his soldiers, but (apparently) also by the Jewish elders and scribes (V.31). In the night before the Sunday, which is here already called „the day of the Lord“, this guardians witness Jesus' resurrection where two angels play a decisive role. The text runs as follows:

V.36 καὶ εἶδον ἀνοιχθέντας τοὺς οὐράνους καὶ δύο ἄνδρας κατέλθοντας ἐκεῖθε πολὺ φέγγος ἔχοντας καὶ ἐγγίσαντας τῷ τάφῳ. 37 ὁ δὲ λίθος ἐκεῖνος ὁ βεβλημένος ἐπὶ τῇ θύρᾳ ἄφ' ἑαυτοῦ κυλισθεὶς ἐπεχώρησε παρὰ μέρος καὶ ὁ τάφος ἠνοιγῆ καὶ ἀμφότεροι οἱ νεανίσκοι εἰσῆλθον.

36 And they saw the heavens opened, and two men descend from there in a great brightness and approach the tomb. 37 But that stone which laid (there) at the entrance started of itself to roll and move sideways, and the tomb was opened and both young men entered.

After it is related that both guardians waken the centurion and the leaders of the „Jews“ in order to tell what has happened, the whole group becomes witness of the subsequent scene:

V.39 καὶ ἐξηγουμένων αὐτῶν ἃ εἶδον πάλιν ὁρῶσιν ἐξελθόντας ἀπὸ τοῦ τάφου τρεῖς ἄνδρας καὶ τοὺς δύο τὸν ἕνα ὑπορθεύοντας καὶ σταυρὸν ἀκολουθοῦντα αὐτοῖς. 40 καὶ τῶν μὲν δύο τὴν κεφαλὴν χωροῦσαν μέχρι τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, τοῦ δὲ χειραγωγομένου ὑπ' αὐτῶν ὑπερβαίνουσιν τοὺς οὐρανοὺς.

39 And while they were telling what they had seen, again they saw three men coming out from the tomb, and two of them supporting one, and a cross following them, 40 and the head of the two reaching to heaven, but that of the one who was led by them overpassing the heavens.

The scene ends with a voice from heaven asking: „Have you preached to Those who sleep?“, whereupon the response „yes“ can be heard from the cross (V.41-42).

The differences as compared to the Synoptics are clear: This scene shows only very superficial relationship to Matthew's account – connections can be found with regard to the guarding of the grave and the descent of one (or in *GosPet* specifically two) angel(s) (but: Matt 28:2: ἄγγελος κυρίου – καταβαίνω; *GosPet* 36: δύο ἄνδρες – κατέρχομαι). Even the description of both the „men“ from heaven, which of course once again

33 Regarding text and translations see Kraus / Nicklas, *Petrusevangelium* 32-53.

functions as an indication to describe them as „heavenly beings“, differs from the Synoptics. However, there are other Biblical texts which speak about the φέγγος, i.e. the „brightness“ or more specifically the „glance of light“ or „radiance“ of heavenly beings or accompanying epiphanies of heavenly beings (2Sam 22:13; Hab 3:4; Ez 1:4,13,27,28; 10:4; 43:2 all LXX). – Of particular interest are those texts which connect the glory of God with „brightness“ as for instance Ez 10:4 LXX: καὶ ἐπλήσεν τὸν οἶκον ἡ νεφέλη καὶ ἡ αὐλὴ ἐπλήσθη τοῦ φέγγους τῆς δόξης κυρίου (and the cloud filled the house and the court was filled from the brightness of the glory of the Lord) .

Also contrary to the angel in Matthew, both men in the *Gospel of Peter* do not roll away the stone in front of the door – this happens on its own. Unlike the angel in Matthew they also do not take a seat on the stone, but – now named νεανίσκοι like the angel in Mark – enter the grave instead. This text also does not tell the actual event of Jesus' resurrection; it does not dare to describe what takes place in the tomb.

Nevertheless *these* angels, who now come out of the tomb to lead the risen one, whose head overpasses the heavens, out of his grave, obviously do not play the part of *angeli interpretes*. Moreover, they indeed seem to demonstrate God's acting in behalf of the crucified Jesus.

The role of these two angels thus does not find any correspondence in the canonical texts mentioned above. However, there are interesting parallels with two other Christian Apocrypha:

– The Latin version of Mark's Gospel in Codex Bobbiensis (k) inserts the following text in Mark 16:4:<sup>34</sup>

*subito autem ad horam tertiam tenebrae diei factae sunt per totum orbem terrae et descenderunt de coelis angeli et surgent (lies: surgente) in claritate vivi dei simul ascenderunt cum eo, et continuo lux facta est.*

*Suddenly, however, at the third hour, during the day a darkness arose on the whole of the earth, and angels descended from heaven, and after he was risen in the Glory of the living God, they ascended together with him, and immediately it became light (again).*

– Probably even closer to the *GosPet* is a short fragment of the *Ascensio Isaiae*, which speaks about resurrection and ascension of the „Beloved“, i.e. Christ. Regarding the context: Beliar is full of wrath against Isaiah, who revealed a number of things, which are now enumerated.

3,14: *And the twelve who were with Him should be offended because of Him: and the watch of those who watched the sepulchre* 15 *And the descent of the angel of the Christian Church, which is in the heavens, whom He will summon in the last days* 16 *And that (Gabriel) the angel of the Holy Spirit, and Michael, the chief of the holy angels, on the third day will open the sepul-*

34 See also Harnack, Bruchstücke 57.

chre 17 And the Beloved sitting on their shoulders will come forth and send out His twelve disciples (Translation R.H. Charles).

The roles of the angels in these texts, which contrary to their canonical counterparts connect resurrection and ascension unambiguously, show small differences in details. What they, however, all have in common is the fact that the angels escort the Risen One into heaven. While in Mark 16:4 *k* the angels clearly form a kind of escort for the Risen One and *AscIsa* also points to the Risen One's triumph, in the *Gospel of Peter* the angels need to „support“ Jesus. Comparable images are found in several ancient texts that express the idea of angels escorting the deceased ones into the otherworld:<sup>35</sup> For instance, in some Greek texts (for example *Od.* 24:1-15; Sophocles, *Aj.* 831-832; Euripides, *Alc.* 743-744 Diogenes Laertius 8:31), Hermes, the messenger (ἄγγελος!) of the Gods, functions as escort for the deceased, but even Charon, usually the ferryman for the dead to cross-over the river Styx into Hades, actually in some cases takes this role. The idea of the deceased's soul being escorted by a guardian daimon to judgement and finally to Hades, is known ever since Plato (*Phaidon* 107c-108c; see also Menander, in Clement v. Alexandria, *str.* 5,130).<sup>36</sup> Also relevant are the following ancient Jewish and early Christian texts:<sup>37</sup> In this respect Luke 16:22a – the scene which testifies of poor Lazarus „being carried into Abraham's lap by angels“ after death – most certainly is the best known text. Furthermore several passages from the *Testament of Abraham* (*Test. Abr.*, long recension; 11,5;12,1-3; 13,12-13), the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* (*Apoc.Zeph.* 4,1-7) or the *Apocalypse of Moses* (*Apoc.Mos.* 37,3-6) should be mentioned.

However, the question remains unanswered why the angels according to the *GosPet* need to „support“ the Risen One. Possibly this is best explained by the fact that he, according to the *GosPet* 19, has lost his δύναμις, his strength. This should not be misunderstood in a docetic manner, as Thomas Hieke rightly argues: „Die ‚Kraft‘ an dieser Stelle [ist] auch nicht ein Äquivalent für Gott, sondern die Kraft des Herrn (Jesus), die Wunderwerke bewirkt, wie sie so oft im Neuen Testament beschrieben werden ... Sie ist es auch, die bewirkt, dass der Herr in EvPetr trotz der Schmerzen schweigen kann – und erst, wenn diese

35 On the following points see Mach, *Entwicklungsstadien* 148-159; Lehtipuu, *Afterlife* 198-205.

36 Even the sirenes could be described as escorts of the dead. In this context they often were portrayed as feathered creatures. For more information cf. Cumont, *vents* 70-75.

37 Here one has to be rather cautious: Many texts considered to be Jewish pseudepigrapha might not be free from later Christian influences.

Kraft ihn verlassen hat, kann er sterben."<sup>38</sup> It remains necessary to ask what the background to the precise description of the angels is: The relationship between the angels' and the Lord's magnitude is surely no problem: The head of the risen Lord overpasses heavens, while the heads of both angels are „only“ reaching heaven: This certainly intends to explain that the „Lord“ is greater than any angel, how gigantic he may ever be.<sup>39</sup> Maybe we can now answer just as easily the question why the angels themselves are portrayed in such magnitude: At the resurrection of the Lord the „greatest“ angels must escort him: What *Asclsa* 3:17 procures through the usage of names and attributions – Michael as the „patron of the angels“! – the *Gospel of Peter* expresses through their description as giants.<sup>40</sup>

5.2 The rest of the text of the *GosPet* is less problematic: When both angels have disappeared together with the Resurrected One and (obviously) the cross – the text does not say how this happens – heaven is reopened:

V.44: καὶ ἔτι διανοοῦμένων αὐτῶν φαίνονται πάλιν ἀνοιχθέντες οἱ οὐρανοὶ καὶ ἄνθρωπός τις κατελθὼν καὶ εἰσελθὼν εἰς τὸ μνῆμα.

*And while they (the guards; TN) were still deliberating, the heavens were again seen open, a man descends and enters the sepulchre.*

This man's function becomes clear in V.55: As Mary Magdalene comes to the grave with her friends, she sees him as a young man, clothed in shining garment, sitting in the middle of the grave. This angel now takes the role of *angelus interpres*, like we saw in Mark and the other Synoptics. He reveals to the woman what has happened with the words „Why have you come? Who do you seek? Not that man who was crucified? He is risen and gone hence. But if you do not believe, stoop down and see the place where he lay: He is not (there). For he is risen and is gone to the place from which has was sent“ (V.56). Hereupon they flee in fear – like in Mark (V.57).

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38 Hieke, *Petrusevangelium* 106. For the Christology of the *GosPet* see also Myllykoski, Kraft.

39 Cf. Vaganay, *Évangile* 300.

40 Mara, *Vangelo* 101, points in this respect to Rev 10:1-3 and writes: „Le dimensioni gigantesche dei tre personaggi e particolarmente del *Kýrios* non hanno, nel contesto, un semplice valore spettacolare, ma ontologico: come in Ap 10,1-3, la statura è indicazione della loro autorità in cielo e in terra.“



## 6. Conclusion

In the narratives about Jesus' resurrection, be they empty tomb stories or ascension narratives, one can observe several very distinct roles of angels:

6.1 The fact that Jesus' resurrection is, in all texts, seen as an act of God, makes it necessary to explain its worldly consequences – the open and empty grave. This is why with the exception of John's Gospel, all texts discussed here know the role of the *angelus interpres*, which, however, at least according to Mark (and possibly also to GosPet) is not overall successful. Additionally, at least in some texts we find the element of (more or less direct) rebuke of the behaviour of the addressed persons (mainly Mark; Luke; Acts; GosPet) and, finally, in Mark and Matthew the angel charges the women with a certain (but very restricted) commission.

6.2 The actual act of Jesus' resurrection is withdrawn from the human eye. Therefore only a few texts allow to discuss (cautiously) whether the angel as God's representative resuscitates Jesus from the dead. In the canonical texts Matt 28 takes this aspect furthest. The descent of the angel, who is assigned Angel of the Lord, is accompanied by signs of theophany, which underline the event's eschatological significance. To this at least one may consider the idea that the act of removing the stone not only serves the women's purpose to enter the tomb. It might as well symbolically stand for the opening of the grave for the crucified Jesus. Only the *Gospel of Peter* develops this theme further: Although even here the act of resuscitation remains hidden, the act of the angels, who descend from heaven and take Jesus from his grave, can be interpreted as a representation of God's acting upon the crucified Jesus.

6.3 Finally, in the three apocryphal texts mentioned above, one can establish yet another role of the angels. All three texts combine the idea of Jesus' resurrection and his ascent to heaven(s). Similar to ancient Jewish (and indirectly also pagan) ideas one can discern in all three texts angels who escort – partly as in a triumph – the Risen One into heaven(s).

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